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GEORGIA: Religious minorities' hopes and doubts ahead of presidential inauguration

By Felix Corley, Forum 18

In the run-up to the inauguration of new president Mikhail Saakashvili on 25 January, religious minority leaders have told Forum 18 News Service they are waiting to see if the new government will bring religious freedom and a decisive end to the violence against religious minorities that has plagued the country since 1999, and change the law to allow non-Orthodox religious communities to gain legal status. Forum 18 has learnt that senior government leaders have declared privately that Old Calendarist priest Basil Mkalavishvili, responsible for much of the violence against Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, will not be arrested before the rescheduled parliamentary elections on 28 March, despite an outstanding warrant.

Ahead of the inauguration of Georgia's new president Mikhail Saakashvili on Sunday (25 January), religious minorities and human rights activists have told Forum 18 News Service of their hopes that the new regime will bring religious freedom, as well as their doubts that anything will change. "The new leaders have spoken generally of democracy and human rights, but have tried not to use phrases like 'freedom of conscience'," Emil Adelkhanov of the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development told Forum 18 from the capital Tbilisi on 23 January. "They haven't wanted to offend those who oppose religious freedom – or to make promises people could remind them of."

He believes on the one hand there is hope for greater religious freedom because "the new leaders listen to the US State Department", while on the other there is pessimism because "they often base themselves on the five-cross flag", a reference to the traditional flag adopted as the new Georgian emblem that many regard as linked to the Orthodox Church.

Forum 18 tried to reach State Minister Zurab Zhvania on 23 January to try to find out what steps the new government was planning to take to introduce religious freedom and end the discrimination against minority faiths, but his office said he was not immediately available.

No spokesmen for the Georgian Orthodox Church were available on 23 January. Giorgi Andriadze, parliamentary secretary at the Patriarchate, told Forum 18 all were in church for a service which he was about to attend.

Some minority religious leaders are optimistic about the new government. "I believe there will be changes for the better," Pastor Giorgi Chitadze, pastor of the Word of Life church in the town of Gori told Forum 18 on 23 January. "I believe democracy will move forward." He admitted that although the new leaders have not specifically committed themselves to religious freedom, they have pledged to abide by the constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion. "Saakashvili is American-educated – he won't behave like the old lot."

Few minority religious leaders could point to any significant improvements in their situation. Baptist, Pentecostal, Adventist, Catholic and Jehovah's Witness representatives have told Forum 18 it is too early to say whether the new leaders will definitively end the religious violence that has plagued Georgia since 1999 and allow religious minorities to gain legal status, a status only the Orthodox Patriarchate has been allowed to attain. "There have been no concrete changes – in Georgia things take time," Irma Mosiashvili, spokeswoman for the Adventists, told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 23 January.

"The only positive change we have seen is that our Watchtower Bible Society was finally able to register with the Justice Ministry on 28 November," Jehovah's Witness lawyer Manuchar Tsimintia told Forum 18 on 23 January. "This is a change – we have now got legal status as a non-governmental organisation." He said there had been no violence, except for a small incident in Senaki in western Georgia at the end of December when a local man had insulted a group of Jehovah's Witnesses. "But we have not held major congresses because of the winter, so we don't know if we could now do so undisturbed." In the past such congresses have been attacked by police and vigilantes.

While religious minority leaders welcomed the end of the series of violent attacks on religious minorities, some were sceptical over whether the calm would last. "We've not had any prominent cases of religious violence for several months, but it doesn't necessarily mean such violence is over," Baptist leader Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 22 January. He pointed out

that Old Calendarist priest Basil Mkalavishvili, who led much of the violence, is out of hospital and at large and has not been arrested, despite an outstanding warrant. "We have not so far seen anyone responsible for the violence being arrested since the ousting of President Shevardnadze. This would have been a signal of change."

Levan Ramishvili, director of the Liberty Institute, a prominent human rights group, says he hopes Mkalavishvili will be arrested soon. "The new government has no alternative than to arrest him," he told Forum 18 on 23 January, "otherwise it will become a great embarrassment for them." But Adelkhanov believes it might be a tactical mistake. "We fear that if they arrest him they will make him a martyr and stir up all his supporters. The violence will then start all over again."

Forum 18 has learnt that senior government leaders have declared privately that Mkalavishvili will not be arrested before the parliamentary elections.

Many believe that officials are waiting for indications of the new government's attitude to minority faiths. "Word of Life has not had problems recently," Chitadze reported, "but they're waiting for orders from above." He said a test of the new government will come in late February, when Swedish Word of Life preacher Carl-Gustaf Severin is scheduled to visit Georgia. "We want to rent halls in Tbilisi and Gori – we'll find out if we're able to or not." Minority faiths are generally banned from renting state or private buildings under pressure from the Orthodox Church.

For others though, their difficulties continue. Nikolai Kalutsky, pastor of a Russian-language Pentecostal church in Tbilisi which has been prevented from meeting for worship because of mob attacks by self-appointed and self-styled Orthodox vigilantes, said his church still cannot meet. "We haven't tried to meet in my home – we're still banned from doing so," he told Forum 18 on 23 January. "There's been no movement on our court challenge to the ban."

Nor have the Catholics been able to get back any of their property confiscated during the Soviet or post-Soviet period. "Our case to get back our old church in central Kutaisi is still in the court," a Catholic who did not wish to be named told Forum 18 from the town on 23 January. "I don't think we'll ever get it back from the Orthodox." She said the local authorities are still refusing to offer the Catholics a plot of land to build a church in the town centre. "All they offer is land on the edge of town. The Orthodox Church and the local governor don't want Catholics to build a church in the town centre. Without Orthodox Church blessing you can't do anything."

Many doubt that the long-promised religion law (Georgia remains the only former Soviet republic without one) will be adopted soon, though Bishop Songulashvili told Forum 18 he had been informed that a text might begin passage through parliament in March, together with an amendment to the Civil Code to remove the ban on registering religious organisations. He said Council of Europe representatives have suggested that the new government should hold a consultation with all religious communities before the rescheduled parliamentary elections which are due on 28 March.

But he believes it might be better to amend the Civil Code and allow religious communities to register and to leave a religion law until later. "The new parliament won't be ready to adopt a democratic religion law," he cautions. "It would be better to wait even a few years for a religion law than to have a law that is full of restrictions."

Ramishvili of the Liberty Institute believes the Civil Code ban on registering religious communities could come from an expected Constitutional Court ruling. "We are helping the Russian Pentecostal community with their legal challenge," he told Forum 18. "We expect in the new circumstances the Constitutional Court will invalidate this ban." He said the challenge will be lodged in February.

He said the change to the Civil Code is necessary as "a first step to restore the equality of all religious communities". "Non-Orthodox communities are almost outlawed at the moment." Such a change would be welcomed by religious minorities. "We have long been praying for a new law and legal status," Mosiashvili of the Adventists declared.

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http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=182

On the difficulties over places of worship see:

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=184

On the difficulties over religious literature see:

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=191

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=192

One the lack of legal status see:

http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=185

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